

Special Meeting and Joint Meeting of the Belmont City Council and Belmont Planning Commission

Tuesday, July 29, 2008

City Council Chambers, One Twin Pines Lane

CALL TO ORDER 7:00 P.M.

ROLL CALL (Council/Commission)

COUNCILMEMBERS PRESENT: Feierbach, Wozniak, Braunstein, Dickenson, Lieberman

COUNCILMEMBERS ABSENT: None

COMMISSIONERS PRESENT: Mercer, Mayer, Frautschi, Reed, McKenzie, Horton, Parsons

COMMISSIONERS ABSENT: None

Staff Present: City Manager Crist, City Attorney Zafferano, Community Development Director de Melo, Police Captain DeSmidt, City Treasurer Violet, City Clerk Cook

PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE

Led by City Manager Crist.

PUBLIC COMMENTS

Judy King, Belmont Park Boosters, stated that this year's concert series has concluded, and she thanked all for attending. She noted that one of the items purchased with proceeds of previous years' concerts are trees. She reported on some recent malicious vandalism of some of the trees located in Twin Pines Park, and asked for the public's help in keeping a watchful eye to curtail such activities.

COUNCIL/COMMISSION COMMENTS

Mayor Lieberman stated that the concert series fulfilled Belmont's vision of maintaining a small town atmosphere. He congratulated the Park Boosters for a successful concert series, and noted other upcoming family activities.

Planning Commission Chair Parsons stated that Ms. King does an outstanding job as President of the Park Boosters, and encouraged new members to consider joining.

CONSENT CALENDAR

Approval of Resolution 10043 Making an Appointment to the Parks and Recreation Commission to Fill a Vacant Term to Expire on the First Day of March 2010

Approval of Resolution 10044 Opposing Fiscally Irresponsible State Budget Decisions that would "Borrow" Local Government, Redevelopment and Transportation Funds

ACTION: On a motion by Councilmember Dickenson, seconded by Councilmember Braunstein, the Consent Agenda was unanimously approved by a show of hands.

ADDITIONAL BUSINESS

Joint Study Session on General Plan Update - Regarding Land Use Policy Amendments for the “Downtown Village Areas”, Economic Development Target Sites, and The Downtown Specific Plan Area (DTSP)

Community Development Director de Melo stated that the purpose of this joint meeting was to have a discussion about how to direct policy issues as the General Plan update project moves forward.

Leslie Gould, General Plan Consultant (Dyett and Bhattia), stated that no decisions would be made this evening. She reviewed the sites that have been targeted for economic development, and described the tours of other cities that have been made over the past several months. She noted that the focus for the General Plan update would be on the downtown core, and then extend along the entire El Camino Real corridor. She reviewed the goals and objectives of this project.

Ms. Gould stated that existing planning documents are confusing, and that old and new zoning districts are mixed together. Design quality is an important factor. Regulations are hampering private development. Mixed-use projects provide a financial incentive for developers. It is recommended that a new zone be created for the downtown village, to include development standards. She reviewed the proposed new zone, and stated that quality ground-floor use is a key element of design. The issue is how to measure density in a mixed-use development.

Ms. Gould clarified that the elimination of existing commercial uses is not recommended, but new or changes in existing development could be addressed as each situation arises. She stated that parking design is an important component in the development of this area, and it should be underground or of a quality design if at grade. The environmental review process for the General Plan update has already begun, and she outlined the upcoming public review process.

Discussion ensued regarding zoning, parking, Cal Train, the Grand Boulevard proposal, and sidewalks.

Natalie Mattei, on behalf of Safeway stores, commended the City for undertaking this update of its General Plan. She noted that Belmont stores were the test program for Safeway’s Lifestyle Remodel Program, which began in 2003. Safeway looks forward to working with staff. She stated she does not support anything that is detrimental to Safeway.

Hartley Laughead, Belmont resident, recommended that Emmett Street not be closed. She noted that the only other exit for the Belmont Village Center is onto Ralston Avenue, which already experiences some difficulties.

Patty Ciesla, Passion Trail Bikes, expressed her excitement regarding what is being proposed in the General Plan update. She recommended that pedestrian zones be created and tied together at the Caltrain station. There is a need for Masonic Way to be pedestrian-oriented.

Discussion ensued regarding the Conditional Use Permit (CUP) process versus Design Review.

Commissioner Frautschi commented that conditional use permits do not discourage development. It is a good tool, and he does not recommend its elimination.

Commissioner Mayer stated that design review provides flexibility, and there is a benefit to reducing the use of CUP's. Design review works in other cities and it has resulted in quality projects.

Commissioner Horton stated that Belmont discourages development. She recommended providing designs ahead of time and requiring developers to follow the design, which would encourage development.

Commissioner Mercer stated that projects should be use-driven, not design-driven. She concurred with Commissioner Horton, and suggested that Belmont provide a list of what sort of projects it would want built. The CUP process can control floor area; therefore, she does not support eliminating this process.

Councilmember Feierbach stated that design and building use are separate parameters. She recommends compiling a comprehensive and well-defined list of permitted uses.

Councilmember Wozniak supports the use of design review if guidelines are well established. She does not support a cookie-cutter approach to design, but wants to provide basic style ideas. The variance process is available if a developer wants to build outside the parameters.

Commissioner McKenzie stated that the CUP process is anti-development. Some developments could utilize this process, but design review should work for others.

Councilmember Dickenson noted that public storage facilities are not a desired use. He stated that there are several good projects that have been built in Belmont.

Chair Parsons does not support the elimination of the CUP process. He cited prior city councils, former staff, and bad planning documents as reasons for the lack of development. CUP's provide protection, but could be relaxed in the downtown core.

Mayor Lieberman recommended setting standards and allowing a developer to do a project within those standards. He does not support micromanaging. If design review works, there is no need for a CUP. Belmont should emulate what is working in other cities.

Councilmember Braunstein stated there is no agreement on why there has been no development over the years. Clarity regarding desired development is needed. He recommended asking developers for their suggestions.

Discussion ensued regarding height and step-back.

Councilmember Wozniak does not support obliterating the view of the hills, and she does not want Belmont to look like other cities. She supports having a variety of setbacks, including structural overhang to create wider sidewalks.

Councilmember Feierbach stated that lots along El Camino Real are not deep. Some larger lots could sustain four stories, but she supports three stories for most. She suggested that proposed buildings be aesthetically pleasing when viewed from all sides, not just from the front. She noted that the pending development at 1300 El Camino Real will be the test.

Commissioner Mercer supports preserving public views, and noted that this guideline exists in the current General Plan. She supports taller buildings near Highway 101, but not at the core or near the hills. A four-story building can be nice if it is well designed and has appropriate setbacks and floor area ratio.

Commissioner McKenzie expressed support for four stories if setbacks are present and design is varied.

Commissioner Frautschi expressed support for one to three stories, and four stories if the building is stepped back. The Downtown Specific Plan has some guiding principles regarding views. Greenbelt is important. He commented that other cities are ignoring landscaping in new developments.

Councilmember Dickenson suggested considering how a building looks from overhead. A potential exists for higher buildings near the Caltrain station and Highway 101, including over the tracks, if approved by Caltrain. He concurs with Councilmember Braunstein's suggestion to consult with contractors and developers.

Chair Parsons noted that views of the bay need to be taken into account when considering height. He supports three stories maximum. He commented that many lots in the downtown are very small, and this is why they are vacant. View corridors are important.

Commissioner Horton stated she does not support five stories except near Highway 101. She recommended pre-planning the size of the building based on the lot size.

Commissioner Mayer stated that the view of the hills should be considered from Ralston Avenue, not just from El Camino Real. He recommended limiting the height for scale, not for the view.

Mayor Lieberman expressed support for three or four stories. He concurred that the lot size will drive the height, and that height limits should be determined ahead of time. He also encourages the assemblage of lots to provide flexibility and better development. Quality is the emphasis.

Discussion ensued regarding mixed-use development and building intensity.

Councilmember Feierbach stated that the entire lot should not be utilized. There is a need for gathering spaces, which will drive the floor area ratio.

Councilmember Wozniak suggested the use of rooftop gardens.

General Plan Consultant Gould stated that 2.5 is a consistent floor area ratio for a three-story building, and that development standards will address other components.

Council and Commission concurred to set 2.5 as the floor area ratio, with design review.

Discussion ensued regarding residential use by right.

Commissioner Reed stated there is a need for residential use to create a vibrant downtown. He expressed support for two stories of residential use above commercial.

Commissioner Frautschi expressed support for existing residential uses, and recommended requiring a conditional use permit for any new residential.

Commissioner McKenzie stated that residential use should be encouraged, not discouraged.

Commissioner Mercer expressed support for residential use by right in the new V-2 zoning category if standards are established. She is concerned regarding density and parking needs. She does not support residential in the new V-4 zoning area, as this is for industrial use, and it would encourage cheap housing.

Councilmember Feierbach stated that development in other cities will impact traffic in Belmont. She commented that mixed use often looks good at first, and then becomes shoddy. She stated that a good example of high-density mixed use is along the Embarcadero in San Francisco.

Councilmember Wozniak supports mixed use, and concurred that parking is a concern. The focus should be on pedestrian, bike, and shuttle use.

Mayor Lieberman stated he is cautious about mixed use, as there are sometimes conflicting issues. He recognizes the need to include residential use in order to make a development financially feasible. He does not support residential use in industrial zones by right, and residential may not be a good use of land near the railroad tracks.

Chair Parsons does not support residential use in the V-4 zoning area, and possibly not in others, either, due to density and parking concerns. El Camino Real was developed as mixed use along its entire corridor. A CUP or design guidelines could drive residential uses.

Discussion ensued regarding residential density.

Chair Parsons stated he would need examples in order to address this issue. Building height and number of stories would drive density. There could be legal ramifications if CUP's are eliminated. There is a need to enact controls.

Commissioner Horton stated that code enforcement can address many issues, and there are other enforcement tools available as well. She supports a mix of densities, as well as size of residential units.

Mayor Lieberman suggested incorporating best practices from other cities.

Discussion ensued regarding land use in the V-4 zoning.

General Plan Consultant Gould stated that existing commercial and residential uses are currently conditional, and it is difficult to determine future uses for this area. It mainly consists of service commercial at this time.

Mayor Lieberman noted that a speaker at a recent Council of Cities meeting suggested that when updating one's General Plan, cities should plan around ways to make the city better, and to consider trends. Existing uses may not be right for the future, and there may be a desire to transform the region.

Councilmember Wozniak noted that this area is already transitioning, and some uses may go away. She supports the inclusion of live/work units, or lofts, and other broader uses.

Chair Parsons noted there are larger lots available in the V-4 zoning area. There is a need for flexibility regarding future uses if this area is redeveloped.

Councilmember Braunstein stated that this planning process lays a foundation for the future. The city should be looking toward structural versus cyclical changes, and flexibility is needed.

Commissioner Horton stated that the area is already evolving. She supports a mix of uses, and some of the least desirable uses could go away.

Councilmember Feierbach expressed concern regarding noise issues if the wrong combination of uses is permitted. She supports live-work units.

Commissioner Mercer expressed concern regarding the loss of an industrial base. She noted that retail is only one component on which to rely. She recommended maintaining some of the existing uses, as they are needed and used by the community.

Commissioner McKenzie stated that Old County Road is already in transition, and the undergrounding project may change the character.

Patty Ciesla, Passion Trail Bikes, stated that a change of zoning will drive what happens on Old County Road. She noted the presence of many regional businesses, and that other small business owners are taking pride in their properties. There are quality businesses that represent a good mix and provide services. She recommended not driving these businesses elsewhere if they are available locally.

Mayor Lieberman suggested reaching out to existing businesses.

Discussion ensued regarding parking.

Commissioner Reed recommended the use underground parking. He expressed concern regarding a reduction in parking opportunities. There is a great deal of vehicular traffic in the downtown core and a need for pedestrian access and safety.

Councilmember Wozniak recommended restricting parking standards to the downtown core. She supports providing for walking and bicycle access.

Councilmember Braunstein expressed support for a reduction in parking requirements if parking is available in other places. He also supports the use of underground parking.

Commissioner Mayer stated there is an issue regarding the timing of crosswalk access. He expressed concern regarding pushing parking into neighborhoods if restricted in the downtown. Providing for parking is a cost in economic development, but it should not be a barrier. There may be a need for parking restrictions in the neighborhoods.

Commissioner Horton stated that underground parking is expensive and may not be feasible to require. She recommended considering the use of parking meters and a city parking lot.

Commissioner Frautschi suggested performing a parking study to determine availability and how many spots are already committed. Developers could pay a fee towards the construction of a city lot.

Councilmember Dickenson stated that more public transportation is needed, but it cannot meet all needs. He has tried to work with Caltrain to increase the number of stops in Belmont.

Commissioner Mercer stated that other cities have parking issues which have pushed parking into neighborhoods. A City-wide parking plan is needed. Each property owner cannot piecemeal parking to meet demand. There should be one-stop parking available. Consideration should be given to traffic flow and pedestrian access.

Councilmember Feierbach expressed concerns regarding the impact on neighborhoods, and there should be no parking restrictions for residents. Street parking is challenged.

Mayor Lieberman stated that Village Center plans could address parking needs. He concurred regarding not using a piecemeal approach to solving this problem, but rather a comprehensive approach. Belmont needs to move away from parking being front and center for development.

Natalie Mattie, on behalf of Safeway stores, stated that parking is a big issue for retailers. The Safeway lot is well used. Undergrounding is expensive. There is a desire for surface parking for safety reasons.

Discussion ensued regarding the General Plan update process.

Councilmember Dickenson stated that business owners should be included in the process, not just property owners.

Councilmember Wozniak stated that a cross-section of the community is needed.

Mayor Lieberman stated a feedback mechanism is needed.

Councilmember Feierbach recommended inviting all participants to any Council or Commission meeting where the General Plan update is to be discussed, so they can participate all the way through the process.

Patty Ciesla, Passion Trail Bikes, stated that more than one public meeting is needed.

Natalie Mattie, on behalf of Safeway stores, suggested including information on the City's website, and to ask businesses to post information as well.

Councilmember Feierbach stated that existing businesses should be taken care of, including code enforcement for improvements. This will encourage development. Building use, gathering places, landscaping, inviting garages, and carbon footprints are important components.

Commissioner Mercer stated that parking is the biggest issue.

Commissioner McKenzie endorsed the process and the progress to date. He would like a smooth process to motivate development. Belmont has been waiting a long time for this update. He supports a master parking plan, and concurred that quality development is needed to create the heart of downtown. He suggested focusing on visioning and what is the draw to Belmont. Create a compelling environment and find a niche, such as cultural, arts, or entertainment. He wants to see upscale, high-quality development, and would like to encourage outdoor dining opportunities.

Commissioner Frautschi stated that the Downtown Specific Plan has served its purpose, and land use changes are necessary. Much has been accomplished. He does not agree that the regulatory process has discouraged development, but there have been other influences. Now is the time to restructure. Quality of life is an important part of the process. He supports a review process but expressed concerns regarding regional developers.

Councilmember Dickenson thanked the businesses for participating. He supports maintaining a good relationship with existing businesses. Belmont has the staff to move this process forward. He recommended extending the Village Zone south to Harbor Boulevard and west to Sixth Avenue. Moving it south will create a more defined southern entrance into Belmont.

Commissioner Horton stated that the economic development effort needs to overcome history. She agreed that existing regulations are cumbersome. There is a need for a desired outcome for citizens, businesses, and the city, and compromises may be necessary. She recommended allowing Old County Road to evolve. She supports fewer rules. Attention should be given to size and mass of buildings near neighborhoods. There is a need for more specific plans for developers.

Commissioner Mayer expressed support for this effort. There is a need for a change in the order of things. There may be risks, and quality of life may be threatened. He supports simplifying the development process. He recommended eliminating the Downtown Specific Plan, even as an advisory tool.

Councilmember Braunstein expressed his appreciation for all the comments made this evening. He supports the process as proposed. Flexibility is needed, as is feedback throughout the process. He wants a holistic approach to this issue.

Commissioner Reed stated that Belmont needs to decide what it wants to be. Many cities are alike. An overall strategy is needed. There is a benefit to mixed use. Parking needs to be addressed so it does not spill into the neighborhoods.

Councilmember Wozniak supports pedestrian and bicycle access. The surrounding neighborhoods should be considered, as they are the closest customers. She would like to retain views and green space, and wants to enable a variety of creative designs. She would also like to simplify the development process and to have Belmont become an incubator for businesses.

Chair Parsons noted there is much consensus among the group. The process has just begun and needs to be marketed. He expressed concerns regarding any wholesale change regarding the regulatory process. He has changed his mind on some issues based on comments provided.

Mayor Lieberman thanked all who participated and noted this has been one of the best meetings in which he has participated. Thoughtful comments were made. He expressed concern regarding the lack of public input, and wants to encourage it for future meetings. There is a desire by all to improve the downtown. He recommended using the visioning documents throughout the process. He would like to leverage best practices from other cities. Tradeoffs are inevitable.

In response to Councilmember Dickenson, Community Development Director de Melo clarified that the landscaping at Highway 101 will be addressed in early 2009. He added that there are budgetary issues regarding the landscape plan.

Community Development Director de Melo stated that much was accomplished in one evening regarding many serious policy issues relative to the General Plan Update. This process will take time, and the Council and Commission have articulated what is important.

Mayor Lieberman thanked the consultant for helping to focus the discussion.

ADJOURNMENT at this time, being 10:25 P.M.

Terri Cook

City Clerk

Council Meeting Tape Recorded and Videotaped